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# Democracy & Education

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## Democratic Education and Agonism Exploring the Critique from Deliberative Theory

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### Abstract

Due to the current political challenges facing democratic societies, including an apparent presence of populist rhetoric, the question of how political discussions should take place in democratic education is as urgent as ever. In the last two decades, one of the most prominent approaches to this question has been the use of deliberative theory. However, the deliberative approach has been criticized from an agonistic perspective for neglecting the role of emotions in political discussions. Deliberative theorists have in turn responded to this critique and argued that the agonistic approach tends to put too much emphasis on students' emotions and identities in political discussions. Recently, as a contribution to this debate, the idea of assimilating agonism with deliberation has been suggested as a way of overcoming the differences between agonism and deliberative theory.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the educational debate between agonism and deliberative theory by exploring the deliberative critique from the vantage point of agonism. I claim that the deliberative critique of agonism is unfounded and based on a misreading of Mouffe's agonistic theory. Furthermore, I argue that the attempt to assimilate agonism with deliberation is not compatible with Mouffe's agonistic theory.

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**I**F SCHOOLS AIM to educate students to become active democratic citizens, we need to ask what kind of experiences political discussions in the classroom should provide students with. When students discuss a political issue in the classroom setting, where different and conflicting opinions about their common future may clash, what should be in the foreground? For instance, should the teacher aim to establish a communicative situation where the goal is to reach a collective will-formation, or should he or she aim to highlight yet maintain the differences and conflictual aspects of the students' claims and opinions? Furthermore, what role should the students' identities and emotions play in these political discussions?

In the research field of citizenship education, the question of how political and controversial issues can (and should) take place in the classroom has been of great interest for educational scholars (see Hess, 2009; Ruitenberg, 2009; Samuelsson, 2016). Political

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discussions among students in the classroom have been highlighted by leading scholars as being of vital importance, not only for a democratic education, but also for a democratic society (see Hess, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, p. 359). The paper takes its starting point in this scholarly discussion and focuses on the normative question of what the guiding principles for political discussions in citizenship education should be. In the last two decades, one of the most prominent approaches to this question has been the use of deliberative theory (see Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015, p. 77; see also McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Roth, 2006). From the perspective of deliberative theory, critique has been directed toward what can be seen as an alternative ideal for political discussions in the classroom, namely, the agonistic ideal.

In short, the deliberative ideal and the agonistic ideal promote different views of classroom discussions. The deliberative ideal emphasizes that a classroom discussion should establish a communicative situation in which different opinions can meet and confront each other in a respectful way. Furthermore, the deliberative ideal underlines that even though a conflict can be a starting point for a discussion, the aim should be to transcend differences and conflicts. In other words, the participants in the discussion should aim towards some form of collective will-formation (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015).

The agonistic ideal, on the other hand, emphasizes the political dimension of conflicts between different opinions and visions of society. This means that conflicts between opinions cannot be reduced to rational deliberation but are bound up with the participants' identities and emotions (see Ruitenberg, 2009; Zembylas, 2011). From an agonistic perspective, a collective will-formation should be understood in terms of hegemony rather than as rational consensus (Gürsözlü, 2009).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the educational debate between agonism and deliberative theory by exploring the deliberative critique from the vantage point of agonism. I critically explore two arguments against the agonistic ideal and the idea of assimilating agonism with deliberation. I claim that the deliberative critique of agonism, concerning identities and emotions in education, is unfounded and based on a misreading of Mouffe's (2005) agonistic theory.

The first argument to be explored is the role of students' identities when discussing political issues in the classroom. The argument is that the agonistic ideal puts too much emphasis on identities and less on the political issue itself. The second argument concerns the role of emotions in classroom discussions and states that when the agonistic ideal brings emotions into classroom discussions, it can prevent students openly and constructively discussing the political problems and issues they are facing. Furthermore, the idea of assimilating agonism with deliberation in education is explored against the background of previous attempts at similar assimilations in the field of political theory (see Khan, 2013; Knops, 2007; Markell, 1997).

First, some of the ways in which deliberative theorists have discussed and handled the role of emotions in education are outlined. Second, agonistic theory and key issues concerning the role of emotions in an agonistic approach to citizenship education

are presented. Finally, and in three succeeding sections, the deliberative critique of agonistic education and the attempt to assimilate agonism with deliberation are explored.

## Deliberative Education and the Role of Emotions

In the field of education, the deliberative perspective is not a single body of coherent principles but consists of different ideas about what should characterize deliberation (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). Thus, educational scholars advocating a deliberative approach in education emphasize different aspects of deliberation. For example, Peterson (2009) has underlined the role of civic listening, empathy, and internal reflection, while Gutmann (1987) has emphasized deliberation in relation to a democratic society and formulated it as a condition for citizens' conscious social reproduction. From Gutmann's perspective, one of the aims of education is to facilitate democratic virtue in terms of "the ability to deliberate, and hence to participate in conscious social reproduction" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 46). However, Roth (2000) has criticized Gutmann's notion of "conscious social reproduction" as being too deterministic and instead has formulated deliberation in terms of "cultural mediation," where communication is oriented toward intersubjective understanding (Roth, 2000, pp. 88–89).

In a literature review of the field of deliberative education, Samuelsson & Bøyum (2015) identified two main strands in the theoretically oriented studies of deliberative education. One strand articulates the deliberative ideal as *political decision-making* and draws mainly on the works of Habermas and Gutmann. The other focuses on deliberation as *a way of life*, where deliberation is related to the way in which people can morally live together. The latter conception of deliberation draws more on the works of Dewey. However, some general points of agreement can be identified in the deliberative ideal (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015; Samuelsson, 2016). One is the importance of enabling diverse opinions and participants being able to change their minds about the issue at stake (Hanson & Howe, 2011; Parker, 2011). A second is that participants listen to each other and that each participant is treated with respect. A third issue that the strands agree on is that the discussion should aim toward some form of collective will-formation, that is, that the deliberation is in some way directed toward the participants' collective agreement (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015).

I will now turn to the question of how the role of emotions has been handled in deliberative theory. First, I describe the critique that stems from agonistic theory and how deliberative theory handles the role of emotions in classroom discussions. Here, the word *emotions* is used synonymously with *passions*. In the passages in which *passions* is used, rather than *emotions*, it reflects other authors' arguments. However, using the term *emotions* in relation to Mouffe's agonistic theory is problematic, because Mouffe makes a conceptual distinction between emotions and passions and states that she theorizes passions. She uses the term *passion* because, as she puts it, "it allows me to underline the dimension of conflict and to suggest a confrontation between collective political identities, two aspects that I take to be constitutive of politics" (Mouffe, 2014, p. 149). Ruitenberg (2009), however, has formulated emotions as a central concept in relation to the agonistic approach to citizenship

education. As the analysis in this paper draws on the educational take on agonistic theory and Ruitenberg's distinction between political and moral emotions, the term *emotions* is used most and no conceptual distinction is made between emotions and passions.

The agonistic critique of the role of emotions in deliberative theory is captured in Ruitenberg's wording "that liberal deliberative approaches to democracy, in their emphasis on reason, have underestimated the importance of the emotions" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 273). Similarly, the agonistic critique of how deliberative theory fails to recognize the central role of emotions in politics and political discussions has been responded to by scholars advocating deliberation, thereby turning it into a vibrant and ongoing conversation. One response to the critique is that it is based on misconceptions about deliberative theory. Samuelsson & Bøyum (2015) have pointed out that a deliberative response has been that "no major deliberative theorist has ever held that deliberators should rely on pure reason alone and avoid all appeals to emotion" (p. 83). Another response to the agonistic critique comes from deliberative theorist Dryzek (2005), who stresses that the concept of communication is wider than reason and rational argumentation. Dryzek has maintained that deliberative communication comes in many forms, such as "rhetoric, testimony, performance, gossip, and jokes" (p. 224). Nonetheless, the role of emotions is a debated issue in deliberative theory (Samuelsson, 2016).

The strategies for dealing with the question of emotions in deliberative theory follow different routes. Also, the critique not only stems from agonistic theory but also from the deliberative approach itself. From a deliberative perspective, Griffin (2012) has argued that Gutmann & Thompson "defend an instrumental understanding of passion as *potentially* intelligent tool for the deliberative citizen" (p. 522) and that "their understanding of the role of emotions remains unsatisfactory because 'they continue to conceive of deliberation exclusively in terms of reason'" (ibid., citing Hall). In turn, Griffin (2012) argued for a deliberative education that aims toward educating "emotional intelligent deliberative citizens" (p. 533), where students learn to handle and understand their own emotions. In the discussion of which role emotions/passions should play in political discussions in the classroom, Englund (2016) has formulated a position that places passions in the background without downplaying the importance of students' commitment to deliberate. A further way of dealing with the role of emotions in deliberative education can be found in Samuelsson's (2016) idea of gradually introducing controversial and emotionally charged topics into the classroom. As I read Samuelsson, the idea is that the teacher first needs to establish a "deliberative communicative pattern" (p. 7) in the classroom, where students can develop and improve their skills to deliberate with each other. Then, once such a communication pattern is established, and students have improved their deliberating skills, more emotionally charged topics can be discussed in the classroom.

Ideas like those of Griffin, Englund, and Samuelsson can be considered different ways in which contemporary deliberative theory addresses the critique that emotions are underestimated in deliberative theory. I return to the role of emotions in deliberative

theory later, after first outlining the agonistic position on emotion and identity in the field of citizenship education.

## Agonistic Education and the Role of Emotions

Drawing on Mouffe's (2005) theory of agonistic pluralism, Ruitenberg (2009) outlines an agonistic approach in which she highlights the importance of enabling political emotions in classrooms. According to Ruitenberg, political emotions can be considered an essential aspect of political and democratic life. Thus, in educating students as democratic and political adversaries, political emotions need to have a legitimate place in citizenship education. The role of emotions as a vital component of an agonistic education is also stressed by Sund & Öhman (2014): "Passion has a political dimension that is important to emphasise in education, especially when consensus-oriented approaches in education run the risk of falling short in terms of acknowledging the political" (p. 654). In defining political emotions, Ruitenberg makes a distinction between political and moral emotions. Whereas political emotions are directed toward a societal object, such as homelessness, a moral emotion is directed toward a personal, or interpersonal, object. An example of a moral emotion is anger about "one's cheating brother's moral transgression" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 277). In a classroom discussion about a political issue, it is political emotions and not moral emotions that should be given a legitimate place. In the agonistic approach, conflicts in classrooms are considered in terms of not only problems that need to be "handled" by the teacher but also as unavoidable aspects of a democratic life together with others (see Todd, 2010). Ruitenberg highlights the need for political disputes to remain political without being reduced to personal conflicts between students or to a "debate competition." In contrast to personal conflicts and competing debate teams, political disputes can be understood in terms of "confrontations in the public sphere of arguments for 'clearly differentiated democratic positions'" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 278, citing Mouffe). Such confrontations are clearly not person-oriented, but are bound up with substantially different visions of what a just society is and how it should be achieved. In that sense, "the other" becomes a legitimate political adversary rather than a mere debate competitor. This approach to conflicts can be understood in terms of enabling students to see that the lines between "us" and "them" are changeable and can be redefined. Or, as Todd (2009) formulates the educational process of reframing conflicts, it could be understood as:

*helping students to reframe expressions of conflict as constituting we/they relations—relations which are continually shifting and contingent—and to help them recognize that the point is not to win the argument, or to eschew the passions of others, but to live in that fragile and unstable space of "conflictual consensus." (p. 114)*

A central aspect in this agonistic education is the destabilization of essentialist identities that can open up for politically formulated identities that are compatible with democracy. In other words, it is about enabling identities that are bound up with different visions of liberty and equality, rather than identities that revolve around

essentially fixed conceptions of who “we” and “they” are. Destabilizing the frontiers between “us” and “them” and changing essentially drawn lines into politically articulated differences is the transformation of the enemy into the adversary. It is thus this transformation of antagonism into agonism that lies at the heart of agonistic education. Zembylas (2011) highlights what the move from an essentialist understanding of identities can mean in education and argues that “an agonistic democracy in citizenship education embraces plural belongings, not in essentialist terms but rather in contingent ones. This means . . . a refocusing of the emphasis from social engagement on the basis of ethnic identities to that of political engagement . . .” (p. 64). Focusing on identity and belonging as interrelated with political engagement, rather than grounded in essentialist identities, could also be a suitable precondition for acknowledging students as political subjects “here and now” and not just as citizens “to be.” Seeing students as “already” political subjects, with an opportunity to signify their own visions and hopes in political terms, could be contrasted with the view in which their perceived essentialist identity prescribes them with political claims (Todd, 2010).

To sum up, the agonistic approach that takes shape from these outlines highlights the importance of sustaining the political in emotions, conflicts, and identities. It is an approach that aims to make room for political subjectivity as a contingent and open endeavour. The next section focuses on two arguments against agonistic education and explores the idea of assimilating agonism with deliberation.

### **Identity or Issue: What Should the Conflict Be About?**

The first argument to be explored is the relation between identities and political issues in classroom discussions. The deliberative critique of agonism highlights that the agonistic approach places students’ identities in focus, rather than the political issue itself. By doing this, conflicts can easily become clashes between individuals, rather than between political ideals or perspectives. A main difference between deliberation and agonism is that “deliberation brings into focus the conflict, the problem, and the different views on a particular substantive issue, while agonism focuses, rather, on the different (often ethnic) identities of the persons/adversaries involved, not on the problem (whatever it is) itself” (Englund, 2016, p. 69).

As I understand this argument, the idea is that by placing an issue in the foreground of the discussion, rather than identity, the more nuanced and dynamic the discussion will become. Characterizing deliberation in the public sphere, Dryzek (2005) highlights that it is reasonable to believe that the more emphasis that is put on the identity of the communicating participants, the more difficult it will be for them to change their minds about the issue in question. In other words, it is difficult to change your mind about an issue “if one’s position is tied to one’s identity” (Dryzek, 2005, p. 229). In relation to classroom discussions, the argument is that if students are encouraged to openly discuss an issue, rather than encounter each other from the vantage point of their identity, they will be better suited to meet and solve the political issues they are facing. From this perspective, a deliberative approach to classroom

discussions seems to be more in line with a citizenship education that fosters mutual respect between citizens than the agonistic approach. Englund (2016) expresses it like this:

*I believe that focusing on personal identities is likely to lead to struggles between individuals, and that views built into and deeply rooted in identities make rational deliberation over the problem itself, and a shared effort to define the problem, more difficult. (p. 69)*

Thus, when identity is in focus, it risks foreclosing the possibilities of rational deliberation by creating conflicts between individuals, instead of enabling the problem itself to enter the foreground. Dryzek (2005) argues that one potential of deliberation is that it aims toward transcending identity-based conflicts by linking identities to more general principles of humanity. In this way, conflicts do not have to stay identity-based or be framed in essentialist terms, even if they started out as such, but instead have the potential to move beyond this point and open up for constructive reconciliation.

How should the critique that agonism is too oriented toward students’ identities be understood? Should the emphasis on identities in the agonistic approach be understood as one that moves the focus away from the political issue itself? As I see it, the deliberative critique rests on two unfounded and erroneous claims about the agonistic conception of identities. First, the critique assumes that a focus on students’ identities substantially differs from a focus on the issue itself. Thus, the critique presupposes that a sharp distinction between identities and political issues can be maintained (cf. Ljunggren, 2010). Second, the critique assumes that the agonistic approach embraces essentialist identity-formations, such as ethnic identities. However, the deliberative critique effectively points to how this aspect of the agonistic approach needs theoretical clarification in relation to education. To explore this critique further, I turn to the agonistic conception of identity.

From an agonistic perspective, the conflicts between identities formulated in essentialist terms are highly problematic. Such conflicts, where the other is an enemy to be attacked rather than an adversary to defeat in the realm of politics, need to be handled within the institutions of society. On this point, agonistic and deliberative theorists seem to agree that conflicts between identities that are formulated in essentialist terms need to be avoided. However, what they disagree on is how such conflicts should be avoided. Englund and Dryzek have suggested deemphasizing and moving beyond identity positions in political discussions, whereas Ruitenberg and Mouffe would prefer to enable alternative collective identities, that is, identities that are not formulated in essentialist terms.

The starting point for the agonistic approach to citizenship education is that some formations of collective identities will take shape in the classroom regardless of whether or not they are recognized by the teacher. Consequently, the focus from an agonistic perspective is the enabling of identity formations that are compatible with democracy. Defining which identity formations are compatible with democracy depends on the distinction between agonism and antagonism. This means that identity

formations that frame “the other” as an enemy, rather than an adversary, are not compatible with democracy. Where “the other” is framed as an adversary, the conflict between “us” and “them” stems from substantially different visions about what a just society is, rather than from ideas about the other’s essential traits. In outlining what agonism could imply in citizenship education, Zembylas (2011) writes: “Undoubtedly, the encounter with the other, as Schaap asserts, is always conditioned by the interpretive framework (or identity) we bring to it; however, *this does not imply that certain ethnic or other identities should become hegemonic or reified* [emphasis added]” (pp. 62–63). In other words, the agonistic approach could be understood as one in which identity matters, but where not every identity formation is desirable.

Mouffe (2005) highlights that if agonistic collective identities are not enabled by societal institutions, there is a risk that conflicts will be played out in an essentialist register, where the other is seen as an enemy rather than an adversary:

*If this adversarial configuration is missing, passions cannot be given a democratic outlet and the agonistic dynamics of pluralism are hindered. The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values. (p. 30)*

Thus, the deliberative critique of how agonism emphasizes identities is unfounded in its assertion that this is an emphasis on essentialist identities. On the contrary, it is precisely these forms of identifications that the agonistic approach aims to counter. From the perspective of agonistic theory, it is the lack of adversarial relations that can enable the growth of identities in essentialist terms, such as ethnic identities. The agonistic approach draws instead on an understanding of identities in terms of plural and contingent belongings (Zembylas, 2011, p. 64).

To sum up, the focus of the agonistic approach is not essentialist identities. On the contrary, the agonistic approach places the confrontation between substantially different visions of society in the foreground. It is an approach that puts the political issue in focus, but in contrast to the deliberative approach, where the role of identities is placed in the background, it aims to enable collective identities to be shaped by different political visions of society (see Mouffe, 2005, pp. 29–31).

As I see it, the agonistic approach highlights the close interplay between identities and political issues by emphasizing the importance of collective identities in political discussions. Consequently, the main difference between the deliberative approach and the agonistic approach is not whether the political issue or political identity should be in focus but whether a relation between identities and political issues should be taken into account in citizenship education. This is an aspect that does not seem to be acknowledged by the deliberative approach in its critique of agonism.

One way of exploring the relation between identity and issue further is through the concept of *political emotions*, emotions that are directed toward social and political issues. However, the agonistic approach has been criticized from a deliberative perspective for putting too much emphasis on the role of emotions in

classroom discussion. This critique is explored further in the next section.

### Is There Room for Political Emotions in the Classroom?

From an agonistic perspective, emotions are an integrated aspect of political and democratic life. It is therefore not surprising that an agonistic approach to citizenship education emphasizes the vital role of emotions in political classroom discussions.

From a deliberative stance, emotions in political discussion are risky. As indicated above, deliberative theory handles this risk in different ways (see Englund, 2016; Griffin, 2012; Samuelsson, 2016). One risk with bringing emotions into political discussions is that they can transform conflict between political positions into conflicts between individuals. In identity-based discussions, emotions can play a key role in such a transformation. Bringing emotions into identity-based classroom discussions is therefore at odds with the deliberative ideal.

*[I]dentity-based discussions, which are different from deliberation with a focus on a substantive problem, also tend to bring passion into the discussion (a point also explicitly underlined in agonism, when it says that deliberative theorists underestimate the emotions)—a passion which I think a deliberative approach would frequently be hesitant to promote. (Englund, 2016, p. 69)*

From a deliberative perspective, emotions in political discussions should be handled and controlled by the teacher and the students together. However, as Englund (2016) points out, these kinds of emotions should not be confused with commitment:

*I believe that, from a deliberative point of view, passion in the classroom should, if possible, be interactively controlled and nuanced by both the teacher and the students (or at least efforts made in that direction), while still leaving room for commitment in the argumentative process. (p. 69)*

The argument should not be interpreted as a total rejection of emotions in the classroom. Rather, it is the task of the teacher to analyze the classroom situation. Even though emotions, especially in identity-based discussions, are hazardous, Englund (2016) argues that: “There are of course occasions where passion has to be brought in, if the school class is indifferent towards touching on problems and conflicting views” (p. 73). In other words, emotions should not be fuelled or emphasized by the teacher when students are discussing political issues in the classroom, except in certain situations where there is widespread indifference among the students. Consequently, according to the deliberative critique, a problem with the agonistic approach is that the emphasis on emotions in agonism tends to constrain the potential of the communicative situations in the classroom by moving the focus away from the political issue itself towards students’ different identities. Such a move risks transforming conflicts over a political issue into personal conflicts between students (see Englund, 2016, p. 69).

To explore this argument, it is important to highlight how the agonistic understanding of emotions that Ruitenberg (2009) and other agonistic-oriented educational scholars formulate is not a

valid target for the deliberative critique. As indicated above, Ruitenberg (2009) has defined political emotions as emotions directed toward societal issues, such as homelessness, and moral emotions as being directed towards personal or interpersonal issues (cf. White, 2012, pp. 2–3). The essential difference between the two kinds of emotions is that they are directed toward different kind of objects. Accordingly, Ruitenberg argues that they should not be seen as equally relevant in classroom discussions but that it is the political emotions that should have a given place in classroom discussions. With this distinction in the foreground, the argument from deliberative theory becomes problematic. The core of this argument is that by bringing emotions into the classroom, conflicts will become personal between students, which is undesirable. Instead, the focus should be on the political issue itself. This argument would be decisive if the agonistic approach embraced *moral* emotions as relevant for political discussions in the classroom. However, when it comes to embracing *political* emotions that are directed toward social relations and issues, the deliberative argument does not seem to undermine the agonistic approach. On the contrary, both Ruitenberg (2009) and Englund (2016) seem to agree that it is a problem if emotions in a classroom discussion become person-oriented. Ruitenberg (2009) is clear on this point; “educating political emotions would require that students learn to distinguish between emotions on behalf of themselves and emotions on behalf of a political collective, i.e., on behalf of views for the social order” (p. 276). What the two scholars seem to disagree on is how person-oriented emotions should be handled or avoided. Englund (2016) argues that the teacher and the students should jointly and interactively control person-oriented emotions/passions, whereas Ruitenberg argues that students need to learn to distinguish between their political emotions and their moral emotions:

*The emotions relevant to political education are not those associated with a personal sense of entitlement or with a collective based on an essentialist conception of identity, but rather emotions on behalf of a political collective, associated with views of particular hegemonic social relations. (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 277)*

This implies that the emotions that are supported by the agonistic approach are directed away from personal issues and are instead directed toward social issues and bound up with collective identities.

However, even though Ruitenberg’s distinction answers the deliberative critique, it is still problematic. We could ask whether it is reasonable to hold a position that requires students to decide if their emotion qualifies as a political or a moral emotion. Such an understanding places emotions in a rather strong rationalistic framework. I have elsewhere argued that a definition of political emotions that takes its starting point in which object the emotion is directed towards is a problematic way of discerning whether it is a political emotion or not (Tryggvason, 2017).

From an agonistic perspective, a point of departure for defining political emotions could instead be found in the agonistic notion of *the political* as an articulated and contingent distinction between “us” and “them”. If emotions in this sense are bound up

with the question of collective identities, in which *what I feel* is inseparable from *who I am* (see Boler, 1999), then political emotions, in terms of being emotions that are directed toward social and political issues, can be seen as something that binds the identity to the political issue. In relation to the previous section, this conception of political emotions makes it difficult to sustain the sharp distinction between identity and issue that the deliberative theory rests on in its critique of agonism.

Still, even if the role of political emotions in classrooms could be further emphasized, it does not mean that *all* political emotions should be seen as relevant in a democratic citizenship education. In theorizing agonistic emotions, Mihai (2014) stresses that emotions that are relevant for democracy “must not violate certain rules of engagement with the different other, the very rules that undergird a democratic ethos and that make agonism possible” (p. 40). For a societal institution, such as education, an important task is to enable political emotions that are within the ethico-political values of democracy (Sund & Öhman, 2014, p. 653–654; see also Mihai, 2014, p. 44).

Emotions in themselves are therefore not as problematic from the agonistic perspective. However, they do become problematic or irrelevant if they are directed toward the personal lives of other students, or if their political content is antagonistic or antidemocratically oriented (Mihai, 2014, p. 45). Thus, I argue that the agonistic notion of political emotions that are relevant in classroom discussions coincides with Englund’s notion of *commitment*. However, where Englund has advocated commitment, as opposed to indifference, an agonistic approach would be to understand this in terms of emotions, such as political *hope* instead of political *resentment* (see Mihai, 2014).

Given the agonistic understanding of how the political dimension of emotions is bound up with collective identities and the boundaries between “us” and “them,” emotions cannot be “brought into” political discussions. If the discussion truly is political, then the emotions are already there. The main question that the deliberative critique points to is therefore not whether emotions should be brought into the discussions or not, but rather: How can emotions that revolve along the line between “us” and “them,” in ways that are compatible with the ethico-political values of liberty and equality, be given the possibility to flourish in the classroom? In other words, how can the lines between different visions of liberty and equality, and the emotions bound up with these, be continuously drawn and redrawn within education?

### **The Problems with Assimilating Agonism with Deliberation**

Against the background of the above sections, we could ask whether agonism and deliberative theory can be assimilated in a fruitful way. Some similarities can be identified between agonism and deliberation, such as the joint critique of essentialist identities and person-oriented emotions within education, which could indicate a fruitful assimilation between them. However, in the following, I argue that the attempt to assimilate agonism with deliberation in citizenship education cannot be successful if the notion of agonism stems from Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism. Drawing on previous debates in the field of political

theory, Mouffe's agonism appears to be incompatible with the central assumptions of deliberative theory. Instead, I argue that an assimilation of this kind would have to be based on other notions and definitions of agonism if it is to be successful.

In the field of political theory, several different ideas about how agonism and deliberation could be integrated have been put forward (Jeziarska, 2011; Khan, 2013; Knops, 2007; Markell, 1997). The political theorist Gürsözlü (2009) has pointed out that attempts to assimilate agonistic theory with deliberative theory can either be seen as a strategy to formulate *deliberation as agonism*, or to formulate *agonism as deliberation*. The former strategy stresses the agonistic and conflictual aspects of deliberative theory (e.g., Knops, 2007), while the latter emphasizes that agonistic theory is dependent on an idea of consensus and collective will-formation (e.g., Erman, 2009). In the following, the discussion is limited to the formulation of *deliberation as agonism*, because this strategy has been put forward in the field of citizenship education.

In the strategy of formulating *deliberation as agonism*, agonistic struggles are regarded as a component that is handled by deliberation. Hence, deliberation is already seen as agonistic in its characteristics in that it takes its starting point in the conflict. As Gürsözlü (2009) expresses it, it is an idea that "discursive politics does not only tolerate agonistic political action but also requires it" (p. 362). The difference from a deliberative perspective is that deliberative theory places an ideal to move beyond the point of agonistic struggles. Agonistic theory lacks such an ideal. However, the strategy to assimilate agonism with deliberative theory is problematic. In his critique of Markell's (1997) attempt to assimilate agonism with deliberation, Gürsözlü (2009) shows that the approach to equate the agonistic notion of conflict with the deliberative notion of conflict would result in a "tamed version" of agonism, where antagonism as a constituent of agonism is overlooked (p. 364).

In the field of education, the strategy of formulating deliberation as agonism can be identified in Englund's (2016) idea of seeing "agonism as a link to deliberation" (p. 70). The starting point for this line of reasoning is that agonism is seen as an attempt to overcome antagonism, because it is a transformation of antagonistic struggles between deadly enemies into democratic struggles between political adversaries. From Englund's deliberative perspective, a reasonable question is why citizenship education should settle with agonism as an end, when it can aim towards deliberative ideals. Englund emphasizes that some form of conflict constitutes a necessary precondition for deliberation. Accordingly, an agonistic conflict can therefore be a first step and a precondition for the second step, which is deliberation. From this perspective, deliberation is understood as both a qualification and a transformation of agonistic struggles into a communicative situation that starts with a conflict but does not place the conflict as the end point. In this sense, deliberation is already incorporating the conflictual aspects emphasized by agonistic theory while at the same time aiming to overcome them. In short, deliberation is seen as being agonistic because it stems from a conflict, although it differs from agonism in its normative aim to reach beyond the conflict. Returning to the field of political theory, Gürsözlü's

critique of Markell seems to be applicable to this educational idea of formulating "agonism as a link to deliberation." In my view, there are two main reasons as to why the idea of agonism as a link to deliberation is not compatible with Mouffe's theory of agonism. Following Gürsözlü, such an approach needs to be based on a "tamed version" of agonism if it is to be successful.

First, the idea of seeing agonism as a link to deliberation and the ambition to overcome the adversarial relation rests on the assumption that antagonism can be eradicated. This assimilative attempt does not take into account that agonism is not a relation where antagonism is overcome, but a relation where antagonism is merely sublimated. One of Mouffe's central arguments is that if there is no room for *agonistic* conflicts, then there is an overarching risk that conflicts will become *antagonistic*: "My argument is that, when the channels are not available through which conflicts could take an 'agonistic' form, those conflicts tend to emerge on the antagonistic mode" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 5). If agonism would be transformed into deliberation, conflicts could "emerge on the antagonistic mode." Consequently, an attempt to overcome agonistic conflicts and transform them into deliberation presupposes that antagonism could be eradicated. Such a proposal is at direct odds with Mouffe's conception of agonism, which becomes clear in Mouffe's formulation of the difference between her own theoretical position, which is grounded in Carl Schmitt and that of other agonistic scholars who draw on the works of Hannah Arendt and Friedrich Nietzsche:<sup>1</sup> "[W]hat you have is 'agonism without antagonism, whilst my position is 'agonism with antagonism.' My understanding of agonistic relation is that it is sublimated antagonism" (Mouffe, cited in Dreyer Hansen & Sonnichsen, 2014, p. 268).

This implies that even if a conflict is a precondition for deliberation, and agonism is a conflict between "friendly enemies" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 13), it does not mean that agonism can easily function as a precondition for deliberation. The agonistic notion of conflict clearly seems to differ from the deliberative notion of conflict. In Mouffe's (2005) theory, antagonism is an ontological concept, while the deliberative notion of conflict is an ontic concept. As Mouffe formulates it, the agonistic conflict between adversaries is a sublimation of antagonism and never an eradication of antagonism. In contrast to this, in the deliberative perspective put forward by Englund, the notion of conflict designates a phenomenon that theoretically can be overcome, at least temporarily. Whether the conflict is overcome or not and consensus is achieved is, from the deliberative perspective, ultimately seen as an empirical question (see Englund, 2016, p. 66). The deliberative notion of conflict therefore clearly differs from the agonistic theory of antagonism as an ontological condition for human societies (Mouffe, 2005, p. 19). Thus, to successfully assimilate agonism with deliberation, an "agonism without antagonism" seem to be what is needed, rather than the notion of agonism that Mouffe formulates.

Second, if a rational consensus is, at least theoretically, conceivable, it implies that the agonistic idea of how *collective*

1 Mouffe mentions Bonnie Honig as an agonistic scholar inspired by Hannah Arendt and William Connolly as a Nietzsche-inspired agonistic scholar (Dreyer Hansen & Sonnichsen, 2014).

*identities* always constitute an outside is incorrect (see Mouffe, 2005, pp. 14–19). Thus, the idea that there is no need to settle with agonism because a rational consensus is achievable implies that politics without adversaries is possible. If there is a possibility to create political unity through open and rational deliberation, without creating an outside consisting of “others,” then very little is left of Mouffe’s agonistic theory. The attempt to assimilate agonism with deliberation therefore seems to ignore a core assumption in the agonistic theory, namely that an all-inclusive political consensus is ultimately a contradiction. Given the Schmittian notion of the political as the distinction between “us” and “them,” which is the starting point for Mouffe’s (2005) agonistic theory, an all-inclusive political consensus is not possible to achieve. If it is an all-inclusive consensus, then it cannot be a *political* consensus. Moreover, if it is a political consensus, it cannot be *all-inclusive*. The critic could here point to how Mouffe’s agonistic theory is based on a conception of consensus in its idea of transforming the enemy into an adversary (e.g., Erman, 2009). However, when Mouffe (1999, p. 756) puts forward the need for a “conflictual consensus” on the ethico-political values of democracy, it is not an attempt to reach an all-inclusive consensus. Rather, as Gürsözlü (2009) has made clear, it aims for a constitution of hegemony: “As, such, for Mouffe, what consensus around liberal-democratic values means is the constitution of a hegemony not the elimination of it” (p. 359).

To sum up, if agonism is to be successfully assimilated with deliberation and seen as the first step toward deliberation, then Mouffe’s agonistic theory needs to be put aside and other more “tamed” notions of agonism put forward (see Gürsözlü, 2009, p. 364).

## Conclusion

In this paper I argue that the deliberative critique of the agonistic approach to citizenship education is based on a misreading of the main concepts in agonistic theory. The argument is that the deliberative critique erroneously claims that agonism tends to emphasize essentialist identities in education, something which could add fuel to conflicts between persons rather than between political issues and perspectives.

Returning to the question of which principles should be the main ones for political discussions in the classroom, the agonistic approach and the deliberative approach provide different answers. From the agonistic perspective, a principle that summarizes the approach is *the acknowledgment of the political dimension* in emotions, identities, and conflicts. With this principle in the foreground, the agonistic approach highlights the intimate interplay between the political issue at stake and students’ identities and emotions when engaging in political discussions. From a deliberative stance, the main principles for political discussions in the classroom can be found in the procedural framework of classroom communication and are the principle of enabling diverse opinions, the principle of mutual respect between participants and the aim towards a collective will-formation (see Samuelsson, 2016).

This difference between agonism and deliberative theory stem from their different theoretical and political roots (in Habermas and Dewey on the one hand, and Mouffe on the other) and are ultimately based on different conceptions about politics and democracy. Thus, educating students to become active democratic citizens could mean different things if the teacher takes an agonistic or a deliberative stance. With the contemporary challenges that democratic societies face, the role of citizenship education cannot be overestimated. How this citizenship education should take shape and which principles should be put in the foreground when students meet each other in political discussion are questions that need to be further discussed.

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